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ABSTRACT

This document reports on the effects of an integenerational program which was conducted to involve senior citizen volunteers with preschool children in a university day care setting. The primary emphases of the project were to enhance the children's reading readiness and foster a mutually beneficial relationship between seniors and children. Project activities included senior volunteer recruitment and training sessions, an intergenerational reading project, library visit, and a senior citizens recognition party. A total of 53 children in an experimental group had weekly contact with the seniors, while 9 children in a "control" group did not. Volunteers, 21 in number, were trained in methods of reading to young children. Data were collected through pre- and post-test questionnaires and analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively. Findings revealed overall positive effects for senior citizens, children and their parents, and teachers in the center. A total of 41 references are cited. (RH)

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The Child Care Center Intergenerational Project at Northeastern Illinois University

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Abstract

This study reports the effects of an intergenerational program which was conducted to involve senior citizen volunteers with preschool children in a university day care setting. The primary emphases of the project were to enhance the children's reading readiness and foster a mutually beneficial relationship between seniors and children. This pilot study revealed overall positive effects for senior citizens, and children, thir parents, and teachers in the center.

The Child Care Center Intergenerational Project at Northeastern Illinois University

Recently, there has been an increased interest in the relationships of senior citizens with young children. Margaret Mead (1972) has been an advocate of these relationships. Based on her extensive studies of culture around the world, she believes that youngsters and seniors should interact more with each other. Mead agrees with another spokesman for this cause, Bronfenbrenner (1977) who states that American families are rapidly growing apart and losing contact with the older generation such as with their grandparents. Kalish (1969) and Newman (1982) emphasize this idea through their observations that we live in an age segregated society in which informal, heterogeneous relationships that have formally developed through the family, church, and jobs have been replaced by contacts limited to homogeneous age groups.

Several studies have suggested that the older person's decline in life satisfaction, and younger people's increase in negative stereotypes of the elderly seem to be connected to this trend of age separation (Baum, Newman, & Shore, 1982; Comfort, 1976; Hickey, Hickey, & Kalish, 1968; Marks, Newman, & Onawola, 1985; Lyons, Onawola, & Newman, 1985; McDuffie, Buemi, Patch, Nash, & Brown, 1983; Newman, Vasudev, & Baum, 1983; Seefeldt, 1977; Seefeldt, Jantz, Galper, & Serock, 1977). The impact of this separation between the generations has become apparent. For many seniors, their roles as family teachers and as links between

the past and present have disappeared (Newman, 1982). These older individuals often feel lonely, inadequate and non-productive (Dunkle & Mikelthun, 1983; Peters, 1971). For children, the special care, individual attention, interest and nurturance that seniors can provide is no longer a resource for them.

As a reaction to these trends, intergenerational programs are being developed nationwide that make possible meaningful, productive and frequent contacts between the elderly and young children. Recent research (Dunkle & Mikelthun, 1983; Jones, 1987; Lyons, Onawola & Newman, 1985; Newman, 1982; Riley & Blume, 1983, Robbert, 1981; Sparling & Rogers, 1985; Ventura-Merkel & Parks, 1984) suggests that many benefits can accrue from such programs. These studies indicate that senior citizens can benefit through their participation by improvement in their feelings of self worth and confidence; better physical and mental health; more empathy and understanding of young children; an increase in community involvement and interaction; and opportunities to develop more friendships.

Children with special needs also can be assisted through intergenerational programming. Studies (Carney, Dobson, & Dobson, 1987; Courson & Heward, 1989; Lyons, Onawola, & Newman, 1985; Pyszkowski, 1986; Robbert, 1981; Sparling & Rogers, 1985; Tierce & Seelbach, 1987) suggest that volunteer seniors can give the special youngsters more individualized attention in learning academic tasks at school as well as nurturance and unconditional

acceptance. These kinds of intervention techniques could foster the children's progress in the academic, cognitive, and social-emotional areas of development. Improvement in the youngsters' attitudes toward aging and towards a more positive acceptance of the elderly could be other results (Newman, 1982). Lyons, Medved, & Burns (1985) have designed an ongoing project in which 90 senior volunteers were trained to work with learning disabled, elementary students both in the school and at home. Benefits to participating children and schools were hypothesized to include assistance in complying with P.L. 94-142 (The Education for All Handicapped Children Act), increased staff to student ratio, more individual attention for the exceptional students, consistency of training between school and home, and assistance to teachers. A successful intergenerational project was also described by Sparling & Rogers (1985) which involved the interaction of neurologically impaired preschoolers, normal adolescents and senior residents of a community retirement center. The interaction resulted in social, emotional, and cognitive gains for a significant majority of participants. An additional preschool intergenerational program was implemented in Lakewood, Ohio (Jones, 1987). In this project, senior volunteers read to prekindergarten children who had language delays. Results suggested that the preschoolers experienced improvements in their oral language skills.

Intergenerational programs have been initiated in day care centers which enroll normally developing preschool children

(Eastman, 1989; Fogel, 1985; Ginnane, 1981; Johnson, 1985; McDuffie, Buemi, Patch, Nash & Brown, 1983; Renshaw, 1985; Sellers, 1985). An activity often suggested for senior volunteers in these programs is to read stories to the children. A number of studies have indicated that reading stories to young children develops their reading readiness and fosters their social-emotional growth (Barton, 1986; Burns, Roe, & Ross, 1988; Harris & Sipay, 1985; Heath, 1982; Manolsen, 1984; Mason, 1982; Shickedanz, 1979; Walton, 1989; Wells, 1985). Senior citizens, in an intergenerational child care project, could become volunteer aides who would read stories to preschool children and help in ongoing center activities. The seniors would then be utilized as a resource in fostering reading readiness and in providing the youngsters with nurturance and emotional support.

To test these assumptions, the present study, entitled the Child Care Intergenerational Project, was implemented. The Project involved senior citizens who read stories to preschool children and assisted in classroom activities at the Northeastern Illinois University Child Care Center in Chicago, Illinois.

PROJECT GOALS

There were three major project goals.

The First Goal

The first goal was to encourage an interest in reading and enhance reading readiness in the population of preschool children

who attend Northeastern Illinois University's Child Care Center. An interest in reading may develop from observing the enjoyment others obtain from reading, from pleasurable associations to the act of reading, and from being able to talk about and ask questions about what one has heard read to him or her (Walton, 1989). Research indicates that children must develop an "auding" (or listening) ability and a sufficiently lengthy attention span in order to be ready to read (Harris & Sipay, 1985). Other prerequisite skills include visual and auditory discrimination abilities, memory, and well-developed receptive and expressive language skills (Richek, List, & Lerner, 1983). The individual and nurturing attention given by the seniors to the preschool children should enhance these skills, and develop a greater interest in reading among the children.

The Second Goal

The second goal was to involve senior citizens from the community with the children attending the child care center in a mutually beneficial way.

Senior citizens will be carefully trained to build upon their already natural skills in tending young children. Faculty will train the seniors in a brief seminar in methods of reading to young children, and in ways to increase the children's attention span. The training serves several purposes; to train the seniors to become proficient at reading to young children, while at the same time, enhancing their self-esteem as essential

and contributing members of society. The individual interest shown by seniors to "their preschoolers" should be beneficial to the children and the teachers in the Child Care Center setting. In addition, while children are interacting with the seniors, teachers and staff at the Child Care Center will have an opportunity to observe each child in an objective manner.

The Third Goal

The third goal to conduct a pilot research project measuring what changes, if any, occur in the perceptions of the parents of the children, the seniors, and the staff of the child care center regarding interest in reading and other measures of satisfaction.

In order to ascertain what changes, if any, result from the intergenerational project, survey forms will be administered pre- and post- intervention to the parents, seniors and staff. A control group of children who do not attend the Center on Friday mornings (the target intervention time) will be used for comparison.

PROJECT ACTIVITIES

Senior Volunteer Recruitment and Training Sessions

In order to recruit senior citizens for this project, faculty contacted local senior citizen groups and made presentations regarding the project. These took place in October, 1988. Publicity in local newspapers was also utilized as an additional way to recruit senior volunteers. Seniors were

informed of the time commitment, and a potential cadre of volunteers were selected.

The initial part of the training session consisted of an informational meeting at the Child Care Center, as well as a tour of the facilities. Once the senior citizens made a commitment, faculty trained them in several methods of reading to children with the purposes listed under the first project goal. Additional emphasis was placed on enhancing the nurturing attitude which inspired the seniors to volunteer. Faculty provided information about motivating young children and methods of obtaining their attention.

Intergenerational Reading Project

Faculty polled teachers and staff at the Child Care Center for information about books which they would like to purchase for the children at the Center. Faculty reviewed these selections and added other appropriate materials. Books were purchased, and made available to all children at the Center.

Every Friday morning from October, 1988 through May, 1989, trained senior citizens read books with "their preschoolers." The seniors selected the books they wanted to read, and discussed the books with the children. The volunteers also assisted in other classroom activities with the children. Project funds paid for a graduate assistant to organize and supervise these activities during the project.

As an incentive for the volunteers, project funds paid for

lunches for those seniors who wished to stay and have lunch with the children. After the lunch, the children resumed their normal activities, and the seniors left the Center.

Library Visit

A visit to the Northeastern Illinois University Library was scheduled on March 31, 1989. Preschool children, seniors, and Child Care Center staff made a field trip to the library to hear stories read by a librarian, and to examine the many preschool books in the library's curriculum and children's literature section.

Senior Recognition Party

Senior citizens were recognized as volunteer aides at a party held on May 19, 1989. Seniors gave books purchased with project funds to "their preschoolers", and the children gave presents of their art work to the seniors.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The pilot research project was conducted during the first year of the program. There were two groups of children involved in the study:

(1) an experimental group, which read stories with the grandparents for a 15 minute period every Friday morning, and interacted with grandparents for about an hour in addition to the reading time.

(2) a "control group", which had no interactions with senior volunteers, and did not see the volunteers, since they did not attend the center on Fridays.

In order to measure perceptions of the effects of the project, a series of written pre- and post- questionnaires were administered. The initial questionnaire was given to seniors, to parents of both the experimental and "control" group children, and to teachers in the Center. These questionnaires were administered in October, 1988 before the project began. Another series of questionnaires (post-measures) were given to the same persons in May, 1989, to determine if there were any perceived changes due to the intergenerational project.

Results from the surveys were collected in June, 1989, and were analyzed during the Fall of that year.

Subjects

There were four groups of subjects in the pilot study; children attending the Center, their parents, the senior volunteers, and the teachers at the Center. The children were divided into two groups: experimental and "control". All of the children were between the ages of 15 months and 6 years at the time of the study. The 53 experimental children had weekly contact with the seniors as described above. The "control" group (quotations are used to indicate that this group was of inadequate size to be used as a full control group) contained 9 children who attended the center

on other days besides Friday.

The parents of the experimental and "control" groups of children constituted the second population of subjects. These parents completed pre- and post- questionnaires, and offered comments to teachers and project directors about the project. The volunteers consisted of 21 senior citizens who were trained by the project directors and teachers in methods of reading to young children, and who came on Fridays to read with the children. The teachers were 6 of the teachers from the Center, who taught both experimental and "control" group children.

Data Collection and Analyses

The data were collected from the results of the pre- and post- questionnaires, and were analyzed in two ways. Quantitative measures were drawn from the subjects' ratings on a Likert-like scale which was constructed on a 1 (low) to 4 (high) scale. Basic demographics on the populations were gathered, and appropriate statistical measures were applied to the data.

Qualitative measures included written statements and oral comments from senior volunteers, parents, and teachers in the Center. Responses to open-ended questions from the questionnaires and comments made by subjects in the study were analyzed.

RESULTS

Both quantitative and qualitative analyses of the results from the pre- and post- questionnaires were made.

Quantitative Results

The quantitative results from the study were derived from statistical analyses of the pre- and post-questionnaires which were completed by the senior volunteers, teachers in the center, and parents of children in the experimental and control groups.

Senior Volunteers

The results from the responses of the senior volunteers are presented in Table 1. Ratings were made on a 1 (low) to 4 (high) scale. In general, the seniors rated themselves lower on items in the second questionnaire than on the first. Asterisked items indicate a statistically significant difference. The downward trend on these ratings is incongruent with all of the quantitative data collected for the study, and with the seniors' enthusiasm for continuing the project.

Insert Table 1 about here

It is possible that these lower scores were due to one

or more of the following factors. First, the initial questionnaire requested volunteers to indicate ..."the extent to which you believe you might gain in each of the following areas as a result of your volunteer experiences", and the second questionnaire asked them to indicate ..."the extent to which you believe changes have occurred in each of the following areas as a result of your volunteer experience". The wording of these questionnaires might have been inappropriate, and it is probable that the seniors did not remember their initial ratings. The seniors may have had higher expectations for what would occur in these areas than were actually realized, yet other areas which were unassessed might have been more important to them.

Teachers in the Child Care Center

Table 2 contains the results of the teachers' responses to the surveys. Teachers were requested to rate these items before and after the first year of the project. The teachers' ratings showed positive trends for most items. The increase in children's self-esteem was statistically significant.

Insert Table 2 about here

The positive trends indicated by the teachers' responses match their statements to the open-ended questions

on the surveys. In comparing teachers' responses to those of the grandparents', teachers may have more familiarity with completing questionnaires, and thus their responses to numerical and qualitative questions were more congruent. In constructing the questionnaires, the grandparents' questionnaire focussed on "grandparent changes", and the teachers' questionnaire focussed on "child changes" for the most part.

Parents

The results of the parents' responses to the questionnaires are presented in Table 3. The responses of the parents of children who had senior volunteers read to them are presented under the Experimental column, and the responses of the children who were not involved with the grandparents are presented in the "Control" column. Pre- and post- measures are compared for each group.

Insert Table 2 about here

There was a significant difference noted in the experimental and "control" groups on the initial questionnaire responses. Parents from the "control" group rated their children as significantly more likely to enjoy listening to stories read aloud than those parents of the experimental group. There were no statistically significant

changes for either group on this item. It is possible that the "control" group parents had more time to read to their children because the children attended the Center on a part-time basis, and thus were with their parents more frequently than those children who attend the Center on a full-time basis.

Statistically significant differences occurred in the parent ratings of the experimental group on two items, commenting on pictures in the story, and answering questions about the story. The "control" group showed a statistically significant difference in pre- and post- measures on answering questions about the story also. These data indicate that reading interest had increased over time on two measures for the experimental group and on one measure for the "controls".

Qualitative Results

The qualitative results from the study were drawn from verbal and written comments by the senior volunteers, children and teachers in the center, and parents of children in the experimental and control groups. Actual quotations from the various respondents are categorized and reported in the following paragraphs. The qualitative results were overwhelmingly positive in nature.

Senior Volunteers

"I am a 1930 high school graduate, and I never could go to college. All my life, I wanted to be a kindergarten teacher, and now, in my 70's - I am one!

"Everybody needs each other at some time in their life--reading to someone is a bridge. I will never lose my love for reading children's books. I have fond memories of my parents reading to me, and also of reading to my son."

"The wee folks are so loving and greet us so warmly each week when we arrive."

"I have loved books and reading and feel my life has been enriched because of it and would like to pass this on to children whose parents may not have the time to give them this experience."

"I have a concern over the present need for mothers to have to place children (almost from birth) into the care of institutions. I feel the lower the ratio of children to adults, the more benefit to our children and in the final analysis to our country. I thought this would be an opportunity to help a little in this area."

"The children were always concerned about our health and asked about us when we were absent and were glad to see us when we came."

"These children really seem to need to talk to someone who will really listen."

"I thought it would be mostly reading to the children but it turned out to be a lot different. I got to know the children, their likes and dislikes. They grow on you."

As a result of this project, the university has become far more accessible to seniors. Several of them have attended concerts, and participated in the health and fitness workshops. Some of the volunteers have even indicated a desire to attend and visit classes. The seniors indicated that they enjoy coming to campus.

Several seniors indicated that they liked the "free lunch" very much. It gave them a chance to be with the

children longer, and also provided a social experience for them. Some seniors preferred to leave as soon as their reading and helping activities were over, but several volunteers indicated that the lunch was an important part of the program for them.

Seniors were surprised initially at the short attention spans of the children who were under three years of age. To their credit, they asked the project directors and Center director what to do about this, and were advised to ask children questions about the book, and to allow the child to sit only as long as he/she was interested in the book. The additional advice was given in the form of education regarding the chronological ages of the children and normal child growth and development. As the seniors practiced more efficacious methods of involving the children in reading the books, the children also matured and attended longer. This was reinforcing to the grandparent volunteers.

Several volunteers commented on children who were initially very shy and withdrawn, but who, with time "blossomed, became chatterboxes, acted more open and happy". Seniors were gratified to see these changes in "their children".

Children in the Center

Although there was no formal survey of the children in the center, several of the children (ages 15 months to six years) made spontaneous comments to their senior volunteers

about the experience of having a "special Grandma or Grandpa". One child told a volunteer that she had asked her daddy if "I could adopt you as a grandma". They showed joy each Friday when the seniors arrived.

Teachers from the Center

"Children were allowed to communicate with a different generation."

"Yes, I have seen a difference in the classroom. Since some of the students have acquired a reading vocabulary of their own, sometimes they try to "read" the story to the grandparents."

"I think the senior citizens that volunteered in the toddler room really enjoyed the affection that they received from the children. The children enjoyed the grandparents' company."

"I expected the grandparents to fulfill their agreement and read to the children. They did do this, but unexpectedly developed relationships with every child in the room and always showed concern for them. The children love the grandparents and wait patiently to see them the next week."

"Children are now bringing books from home more."

"The children are friendlier to older people since the grandparent program."

Experimental Group - Parents' Comments

One child attends the same church as "his grandpa", and recently performed in a play which was attended by his parents and the "grandpa". After the play, the parents told the senior volunteer that their son now asks them to buy books and read to him every night. Before this program, their child did not show any interest in books or reading.

Several (8) parents indicated that their child really loved to read, and that they noticed that the child wanted to make up the story and embellish it. Three parents noted their child "reading" to a younger sibling. Additional parent comments include:

"I believe that the grandparent program has assited "A" with acquiring a sense of enjoyment and satisfaction by providing a positive learning experience."

"L" likes to make up her own version of the story, and pretend to read it to me. She is very fond of her "grandparent" and I would love to see the program continue."

Control Group - Parents' Comments

Most comments from "control group" parents were of a positive nature regarding their child's interest in reading and love of books. There were no real differences in the pre-and post- comments, except for indicating that once a child had memorized a favorite book, they "pretended to read" it to themselves.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

The three project goals:

1. To encourage an interest in reading and enhance reading readiness in the population of preschool children who attend Northeastern Illinois

University's Child Care Center.

2. To involve senior citizens from the community with the children attending the child care center in a mutually beneficial way.
3. To conduct a pilot research project measuring what changes, if any, occur in the perceptions of the parents of the children, the seniors, and the staff of the child care center regarding interest in reading and other measures of satisfaction.

These goals were met during the two years the project was conducted. The first goal, to encourage an interest in reading, was documented by responses to the surveys and from unsolicited statements made by seniors, children, parents, and staff. The second goal, involving the seniors with the children was met on a weekly basis as the seniors attended the center every Friday. The third goal, conducting a pilot research project, was met through administration and analyses of the quantitative and qualitative measures discussed earlier in the report.

RECOMMENDATIONS

After reviewing the results of the program, it is suggested that the intergenerational project be continued at the Child Care Center in the future. This program has proven beneficial to the children, teachers, parents and volunteers. The children look forward to seeing the seniors

every Friday, and parents have also expressed the hope that the program will be in effect. The volunteers who continue to attend have stated that they would like to continue their work with the children.

The program is self-sustaining, requiring no capital expenditures other than occasional purchases of new and age-appropriate books, and provisions for lunches for those volunteers who wish to participate in that aspect of the program. The maximum per annum cost of these materials would be approximately $200 for books and $200 for lunches.

In order to facilitate the continuation of the project, the project director and assistant director have printed a brief set of guidelines for future volunteers which will orient them to the center, and instruct them about reading books to young children. In addition, current volunteers have offered to serve as "mentors" to potential new seniors who would like to join the program. The Child Care Center Director is enthusiastic about continuing the program and is willing to assist future senior volunteers.

In conclusion, this project has been very successful for the four populations it was intended to serve; the children, the seniors, the parents, and the staff at the Child Care Center. It is impossible to adequately describe in print the joy, love, and enthusiasm in the Center every Friday when the children greet "grandma" and "grandpa". The

project director and assistant director would like to express their gratitude to the wonderful volunteers, the dedicated teachers and director of the Child Care Center, the adorable children, and their caring parents, for making this project possible. The directors also extend their appreciation to the administration of Northeastern Illinois University which funded this project for two years as a University Foundation Mini Grant.

Note: The authors would like to express appreciation to Dr. Kathleen Carlson, Associate Dean, College of Business and Management, Northeastern Illinois University, for assistance with statistical analysis for this study.

Table I

Comparisons of Pre and Post Ratings of Satisfaction by Senior Volunteers

	Mean Ratings on a 1 (low to 4 (high) scale		Significance				
Satisfaction Item	Pre	Post	X	p	Paired Samples	t	p
Feelings about self	3.6	3.2	12.03	<.05		2.35	<.05
Physical health	3.2	2.9	N.S.			N.S.	
Mental health	3.4	3.1	N.S.			N.S.	
Social life	2.7	2.9	N.S.			N.S.	
Satisfaction with life	3.6	3.4	N.S.			N.S.	
Openness to new ideas	3.8	3.6	N.S.			N.S.	
Interest in children's education	3.7	3.6	15.37	<.01		N.S.	
Energy level	3.2	3.0	N.S.			2.40	<.05
Involvement in community	3.2	3.0	N.S.			N.S.	
Knowledge and skills	3.4	2.8	N.S.			3.10	<.01

Note: N varies from 15 to 21 respondents, depending on item.

Table 2

Comparisons of Pre and Post Teachers' Ratings on Behavior of Children in the Experimental Group

	Mean Ratings on a 1 (low to 4 (high) scale		Significance		
Behavior	Pre	Post	Paired Samples	t	p
Self-esteem	2.8	3.5	3.16		<.05
Reading readiness	3.5	3.8	N.S.		
Social growth (attention span)	3.3	3.5	N.S.		
Interest in what happens around them	3.3	3.5	N.S.		
Understanding of aging	2.7	3.2	N.S.		
Positive behavior toward others	3.7	3.7	N.S.		
Motivation for learning	3.7	3.8	N.S.		
Cooperative behavior	3.0	3.5	N.S.		
Children relaxed/ contented	3.2	3.5	N.S.		
Teacher-have more time	2.7	2.3	N.S.		
Teacher-insight into	3.2	3.7	N.S.		

Child enjoy listening to stories	3.7	3.8	N.S.
Frequency - child listening to stories	4.0	4.0	N.S.
Length of child's attention span	2.5	2.7	N.S.
Frequency child comments on pictures in books	4.0	3.8	N.S.
Answer question after story read	3.3	3.7	N.S.

Note: N = 6 teachers.

Table 3

Comparisons of Pre and Post Ratings of Children's Behavior by Parents in Experimental and "Control" Groups

	Mean Ratings on a 1 (low to 4 (high) Scale			
	Experimental (N=54)		"Control" (N=9)	
Satisfaction Item	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
*Enjoys listening to stories read aloud	3.6	3.9	4.0	4.0
How often parent read to child	3.5	3.6	3.4	3.6
How long child listens listens to story	3.1	3.2	3.8	3.7
Child comments on pictures in story	3.6	3.8**	3.6	3.6
Child answers questions about	2.9	3.3**	2.6	3.0*

Note: *Significant difference between Experimental and "Control" groups in "Pre" condition.
**p .05 (Paired Samples t test).

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